

"THE STORY OF OUR LIVES FROM YEAR TO YEAR."

ALL THE YEAR ROUND

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SEBASTIAN STROME.

CHAPTER III. AN EMBARRASSMENT AND A DOUBT.

THE morning of the minister's visit to Dene Hall had not begun very pleasantly for Mary Dene. She had received by the early post an anonymous letter.

Although without date and signature, it was in other respects all that a business letter ought to be. It was written in a legible business hand, and was brief and to the point. "Miss Mary Dene," it ran, "the address of a former servant of yours, Fanny Jackson, is Number Ninety-seven, Falkirk Road, Camden Town. It will be to your interest to make immediate enquiries about her."

Miss Dene opened and read this missive at her toilet-table, handling it rather gingerly. It made her cheeks grow a trifle pale at first, and her heart beat faster for a stroke or two, for she had never forgotten Fanny, or ceased to feel responsibility on her account. After the pallor came a flush of haughty resentment at the liberty taken in thus addressing her. Finally, she put the letter down, and sat in thought, her thick hair falling over her white shoulders, and her eyes cast down.

When, several months after her dismissal of Fanny, the girl had left her home secretly, leaving behind her only a few lines to say that she was "going to be happy," Mary had charged herself with some degree of blame for the catastrophe; for if she had not lost her temper, and unjustly boxed Fanny's ears, Fanny might still have been in her service, and if in her service she would not have been likely to

go wrong. This was a tolerably straightforward syllogism, and had Mary's been a morbid temperament it might seriously have disturbed her peace of mind. Certainly she would have given almost anything to have saved Fanny from her disgrace; and, should opportunity ever offer, she would do what she could to put her in the way to retrieve it.

But she had reflected that there must, after all, have been in Fanny a latent tendency to wrong, which would in all probability have made itself felt sooner or later. Her mistress's fondness for her had been the result rather of the personal attractiveness of the girl's manner and appearance than of any special aptitude that she showed for her duties. Beyond a pretty face and a graceful figure, a light deft hand and a native sweetness of disposition, Fanny had been in no way superior to the ordinary run of ladies' maids. She was prone to idleness, to forgetfulness, even to occasional prevarication; her habits were not orderly, and she was somewhat over-fond of dashing and coquettish costumes. Moreover, on leaving Dene Hall, with a letter of hearty recommendation in her pocket, and thirty pounds advance wages, she did not trouble herself to seek a new situation, but went home to her father and mother, who idolised and spoiled her, and entirely approved of the intention she announced of taking a good long rest. In their opinion it was just what the poor dear needed.

One of Fanny's first acts of repose was to take a trip up to London to see her cousins—Mr. Jackson had a married sister living at Hammersmith—and when she came back she was wearing a stylish new bonnet and mantilla, with gloves and boots

to suit. This display gained her the envy of all the tradesmen's daughters in Cedarhurst, who not only had not thirty pounds to dress on, but, given the clothes, would still have lacked Fanny's air and figure to set them off. Fanny, perhaps, found some compensation for their ill-will in the undisguised admiration of all the tradesmen's sons; and also, as was afterwards remembered against her, in the flattering importunities of a certain handsome recruiting-sergeant, who was at that time in the neighbourhood.

Thus nearly a year slipped away, during which Fanny made five or six more visits to her cousins in Hammersmith; and then came the seventh expedition on which she started, but from which she never returned. Her letter gave no clue to her whereabouts; and on enquiry being made in Hammersmith, it transpired that she had been seen there but twice; so that there were five absences, including the present one, to be accounted for. It is needless to remark that ninety-nine hundredths of the honest folk of Cedarhurst accounted for them in only one way; they revelled in the stern joy of repeating "I told you so!" and were chiefly concerned at there being so few people besides Mr. and Mrs. Jackson to whom the phrase would give the requisite mortification. Pretty flighty Fanny had left few friends behind her.

But the minister, and Mary Dene herself, set their faces against the worst interpretation of the girl's conduct, and advocated the view that she was honestly married, and had been somehow prevented from communicating that important fact to her family. But the charity that aims at robbing a scandal of its sting is resented as an injury by that considerable class of persons who find their chief moral comfort and support in being scandalised. The majority of the inhabitants of Cedarhurst clung with pathetic fervour to the belief that an indelible stain had been inflicted upon the fair fame of the parish; nay, these capacious souls could easily have found room for as much more of virtuous reprobation as might have been necessitated by a discovery of Fanny's fellow-criminal among their own friends and neighbours. Unfortunately, the recruiting-sergeant was the only conceivable scapegoat, and no ingenuity could show him to have been born in Cedarhurst. But nothing ever is perfect in this world, not even the horrors.

This anonymous letter addressed to

Mary Dene contained the first news of Fanny that had been received since her disappearance a year before. The fact of its being anonymous indicated that the writer's motive, whatever else it might be, must be dishonourable; and the conventionally proper course for Mary would be to ignore it. And yet was it not her duty to find out whether Fanny were in need of help? Was it not, indeed, a foregone conclusion that the girl must be in need of every ministration that Christian hands and hearts could afford her? Here, then, was a dilemma.

"Why was the letter sent to me rather than to anyone else?" Mary asked herself. "How can it serve my interests to make enquiries about her?"

On the other hand, could the making of such enquiries do Mary any harm? It seemed not.

After pondering over the matter for awhile Miss Dene was visited with an idea, which was to submit the difficulty to the Reverend Arthur Strome, and ask his advice upon it. Composed by this determination she finished her toilet and went down to breakfast.

Aunt Sophia was pacing the room with her arms crossed and an elbow in each hand, and looking down at her pretty feet as one after the other emerged from beneath the hem of her black skirt. At Mary's appearance she underwent a sort of spasm of graceful vivacity, and tripped forward, smiling a good-morning with insinuating unction. The tenderness and devotion uniformly manifested towards her niece by this lady were wonderful to behold, and were not without effect upon its object. Mary had a healthy belief in the reality of her own charms and virtues, and was not obstinately sceptical as to the honesty of her aunt's avowed admiration.

"How do you feel, Mary, darling?" enquired Aunt Sophia, taking the young woman's firm soft hand between both her own dry slippery ones. "Aren't you looking a little pale? You haven't a headache, surely?"

"Nonsense, auntie; when did I ever have a headache?" answered Mary, in her full deep voice.

"No bad news, then?"

"What put such a notion into your head?" Mary demanded, withdrawing her hand rather abruptly. It occurred to her that her aunt might have seen the outside of the anonymous letter, and be on the watch to surprise some information about

it. But Aunt Sophia only said: "Forgive me, dear, but you know I can't help being troublesome with those I love;" and with that they took their seats at the table. Mary opened the previous evening's Standard—a journal which she read regularly and conscientiously; and for a time there was silence, broken only by the tinkle of tea-spoons, and the rustle of the paper, as Mary folded and unfolded it.

"So I look pale, do I?" said Mary at last, putting aside the Standard and taking up the butter-knife. "Well, I'm growing old and lazy, and losing my complexion. I don't take exercise enough. I think I'll walk over to Cedarhurst this morning and make a call at the Vicarage."

"This raw morning! Wouldn't it be wiser to wait till the afternoon?"

No answer from the heiress, who sometimes allowed herself the luxury of ignoring undesirable questions. But the elder lady returned to the charge.

"I believe Donald is to go over this forenoon about the new bridle. He might take any message you wanted to send."

"Donald might deliver my message—if I had any message; but how could I appoint him deputy to enjoy the vicar's society for me?"

Aunt Sophia laughed. Laughter was her least graceful manifestation, though she was an adept at smiling; and this may have been one reason why she laughed but seldom. It was, with her, a short-lived and guttural affair, accompanied by a thrusting out of the chin and a pained contraction of the brow.

"I was only thinking, dear," she said, on recovering her gravity, "that you might, perhaps, have some commissions for Mr. Strome about the Christmas presents for the parish children, you know."

"You had no private reasons, then, for wishing me to stay at home this morning?"

"Private reasons, Mary, dear! You know, darling, I'm the frankest creature in the world. I always blurt out whatever is on my mind. A hidden motive—if that is what you mean—is something I never was capable of. I often wish I were!"

"Did any letters come this morning?" Mary asked abruptly.

The normal hue of Aunt Sophia's countenance was proof against variation; but she half closed her eyes for a moment.

"I think Jane did ~~do~~ something about a letter—but it wasn't for me. Why do you ask, dear?"

"Only so as to get the matter off our minds," replied Mary, with a sarcastic little smile. She leant her cheek on her hand, balanced her spoon on the edge of her cup, and continued: "The letter was for me, but there was nothing in it—of general interest. By-the-way, did you write to your nephew yesterday inviting him here for Christmas Eve?"

"To poor Selim? Yes, indeed! And I am so glad, Mary, dear, that he and your Sebastian are to meet under your roof. Both such noble fellows, and both so devoted to you—it seems a shame that old boyish misunderstanding should keep your Sebastian from feeling kindly towards my poor boy. I'm sure it's not every one would speak of a successful rival as Selim always does of your Sebastian. You will see that they make peace, won't you?"

"My Sebastian, as you are pleased to call him, has no petty enmities!" remarked Mary superbly.

"And so I say, two such noble fellows should love each other."

"Well, I think it depends on Selim."

"Oh, where my Selim has loved once, he loves always! It only needs Mr. Strome to hold out his hand, for Selim to take it."

"Then he never could have loved me."

"Mary, darling! Selim never loved you!"

"Else he would never take his rival's hand while I lived."

This was spoken gravely; and Aunt Sophia, glancing nervously at her niece, was inclined to think that she meant what she said. The good lady was never slow to take a hint, and she mentally noted and corrected several past errors before answering.

"It may be as you say; you have more insight than I into human nature; very likely you understand dear Selim better than I do. Yes; I suppose there is a point beyond which magnanimity becomes meanness. And you are quite right in feeling that Selim could never pass that point. As for poor little me, you mustn't notice my chatter; in these matters I am a mere child compared with you, and I defer to your judgment entirely!"

"Of course I was only in fun," said the perverse heiress after a few moments.

"There is no reason why they shouldn't be just as good friends as ever—at least, so far as I am concerned. Men are not like women—they have other

things to think of. Your nephew has behaved with dignity and generosity so far, and probably needs neither you nor me to tell him what he ought to do."

In regard to this speech Aunt Sophia committed herself no further than by an inarticulate murmur in her throat, and a pensive gaze at the clock on the mantelpiece. Mary presently left the table and moved to the window, where she stood looking out at the broad paths, with their sentinel yew-trees erect and motionless in the pale sunshine, and at the smooth lawn dusted over with last night's frost.

"I think I'll go now," she said, without turning round.

"I suppose you will meet Mr. Sebastian Strome there?" observed Aunt Sophia.

Mary's hands, which were lightly clasped behind her back, tightened their hold upon each other as the elder lady spoke; but she only answered carelessly:

"Nothing is less likely."

Aunt Sophia made no rejoinder; and after waiting a little, Mary added, with a touch of impatience:

"How could he be there?"

"I had a notion the young men were not obliged to be so busy at this season," said the other innocently.

Mary turned and faced her aunt. "Sebastian could leave his studies to come and see me at any time he chose," she said, with a subdued accent of defiance in her tone. "But I am not one of those girls who expect their lovers to be always dancing attendance on them. Sebastian and I are betrothed, and that is enough. We don't need to see each other every day to keep ourselves true!"

Aunt Sophia's faded eyes gleamed for an instant, and the corners of her long mouth twitched, but her voice was as gentle and caressing as ever.

"Young people were so much less sensible in my day," she remarked. "Your attitude is so much more dignified, Mary, darling. But I can remember when my poor old Joshua and I—we were together the livelong day, actually; and Joshua would neglect everything and travel any distance just to kiss my hand, or to hear me call him darling. Heigho! It was all very foolish, I know; and I dare say it would have been far better for us, in a worldly point of view, not to have permitted ourselves any passionate feelings. Still, there was a kind of sweetness in it—there was a delicious, foolish sort of

triumph in knowing that his love for me was too mighty for his strength; and it seems to me even now, when I ought to know better, as if I would go through again all the suffering I have since endured for the sake of living over those tender, loving days."

Aunt Sophia broke gracefully down at this point, pressing her handkerchief lightly to her eyes, and catching her breath gently. Mary, with her face in shadow, frowned a little and bit her upper lip.

"There! you won't laugh at your poor old auntie?" resumed this romantic and emotional personage after a decent interval. "I appreciate how much wiser and better in every respect your way of looking at such things is than mine; but I can't help being what I am, can I? I suppose my peculiar nature demanded some tangible expression and, as it were, experience of affection. No; I'm sure I couldn't have been satisfied, as you are, with the mere abstract assurance. Ah, Mary, dear, how much ache and turmoil of heart you will escape! That refined, passionless atmosphere that you breathe renders you independent of our lowlier joys and sorrows. But you mustn't despise us altogether, will you?"

The petition was, perhaps, gratuitous—possibly, malicious; at all events, Mary remained silent and undemonstrative. But Aunt Sophia, who seemed to be in an unusually confidential mood, flowed on artlessly.

"And that is why—although he is my nephew, and I love him so dearly—that is why I was glad when you gave him up. Selim, you know, is in many ways so like what my poor Joshua used to be. If you had returned his love, he would never have felt happy out of your sight. He would always have been bothering you with little tokens of his love—you would have been quite out of patience with him. He would write you a note even if he knew he was to meet you two hours later; he'd have wanted to tell you all his thoughts and plans, and to make his whole life yours, so to say. Poor Selim! I know him so well. He never could have held himself aloof from you in that grand, lofty way that Sebastian Strome does. He would have thought it the same as saying that he didn't really care for you, or that he cared for someone else more. And, in Selim's case, it would have meant that—I mean, he is so different from your Sebastian, you know. So I always anticipated,

from the first, that you would tire of Selim—such clinging devotion and self-surrender—poor dear boy! I used to tell him so, but of course he wouldn't believe me. I only wish I could believe that he would ever recover the blow—would ever be like his old self again."

"I thought he was very well resigned," said Miss Dene coldly.

"I know, you judge by that letter he sent immediately after his rejection; yes, dear Selim has a great deal of pride. But you haven't seen him since then, or heard from him, as I have. Ah, me! well, it's a thing he would not, of course, wish me to speak of. But I wish he had more of that royal indifference that Mr. Sebastian Strome displays. One needs it in this hard world."

"Why doesn't he get it, then?" Mary demanded with some sharpness.

Aunt Sophia arose, smiling sweetly. "It is not so easy to acquire as those who possess it might suppose. Perhaps, if those who have it in superfluity were able to share with those who have none, it might be better for both." Having despatched this neat little shaft, the good lady gracefully glided from the room, only pausing at the door to ask whether her dear Mary would return home to lunch, or take that meal at the Vicarage. Miss Dene replied curtly that it would depend upon circumstances; and thus the dialogue—if dialogue it could be called—ended.

The heiress, on feeling herself alone, pressed her hands against both sides of her face, and drawing them slowly down the cheeks till the fingers interlaced beneath the chin, let them fall thence to the full length of her arms. Why had she been so cross to poor Aunt Sophia? Perhaps Mary would have found it more difficult to answer that question than would Aunt Sophia herself.

She crossed the room slowly, and entered the adjoining conservatory through the broad arched doorway. It was a luxurious lounging-place on a winter's morning like this, but it was with no purpose of being luxurious that Mary sought it now, save in so far as solitude is sometimes a luxury. The warmth, the fragrance, the fresh green stillness, all those lovely inarticulate influences that could make her happiness happier, were rendered ineffective by her pain. For she was suffering pain—a vague, indignant, anxious pain, whose roots penetrated far inward. When the young woman reached her favourite seat, in a rocky niche

overarched by giant plantains, tears burned in her eyes; but she would not let her face falter, or her lip tremble, in spite of the ache in her throat. "What is there for me to cry about?" was her self-contemptuous question. So she sat proudly beneath the plantains, with her chin upon her palm, and her eyes pregnant of the unacknowledged tears. But by-and-by, as memory began its story to her heart, her expression and attitude softened; she forgot her pride and dignity, and all her present self, and was for a time only the sensitive and feminine creature that God, apart from civilisation, had made her. Only one human being had ever seen her in this mood, and he but once!

On that autumn evening, not so long ago, when a vision of earthly heaven had suddenly been opened to her, a host of ardent and pure potencies, till then unsuspected, had started into tender life in her heart and brain. For a while they had thriven and rejoiced, and an unending future of happy activity had seemed to await them. But the light that called them forth had gradually waned and darkened; and she, throughout that slow tragedy of change, had tried to believe, first that it did not exist, and then, that it was right it should. Not even to herself, and still less to another, would she admit that her lover was less a lover than he ought to be. Rather than doubt him, she chose to doubt her own ideal of life, and all the beauty and glory in which her maiden faith had trusted. And since she must perforce deem him best and highest, it was incumbent on her to deny, or to condemn as visionary and unpractical, the standard of goodness and nobility which intuition had revealed to her. For the woman who has pledged her soul for a lump of glass, in the belief that it is a diamond, there seems to be no choice between regarding all glass as diamonds or losing her soul. It is an alternative that leads to cynicism.

It is the glory of first love that everything connected with it seems unprecedented and peculiar: such chances, such mysteries, have never been known in love's annals before. So Mary had marvelled, in the secret retirements of her soul, at the strange blindness that had kept her from knowing that she loved Sebastian until the moment when he had first spoken to her of love. Not till then had she realised, with a thrill of hot surprise, that he had ruled her heart even from childhood. How

well she remembered every word and look of that great interview; and, still more, the thoughts that could not be spoken, and the emotions that could not be revealed! And at what a critical juncture he had come—the true prince: just when she was miserably trying to persuade herself that no such thing as a true prince existed, and that she might as well yield herself to the very commonplace, but apparently devoted and honest mortal, the sound of whose piteous pleading was still in her ears. What a peril to have escaped so narrowly!

What had Sebastian said to her? Not much; and yet how infinitely more than voluble Selim could have uttered in a twelvemonth. It was all strong and to the purpose; at once masterful and tender. These were the words that her unconscious life had waited to hear; they interpreted its meaning to the past, and forecast the future. They made her precious to herself in the assurance that she was dear to him. They gave her a place and a motive in the world, who had before been homeless and objectless. And when the consecrating kiss had been given and he was gone, then, in her solitude, had she first perceived how intimately he was near her. He had passed out of her bodily sight, but into her spiritual being, there to dwell for ever. She could not lose him unless she first lost herself; she could not lose herself except to find herself in him.

So had it seemed then; yet there had been a disappointment somewhere, which every passing day had rendered more undeniable. Who was to blame for it?

Mary Dene had hitherto shrunk, even from a discussion with herself of this question, as from a kind of disloyalty. Afterwards she decided that whatever fault there was must be on her side. She had anticipated something more than the world had to offer. Sebastian was the highest type of lover possible, and it showed either ignorance or ingratitude in her to be dissatisfied. She therefore framed any number of self-satirising rebukes and arguments to convince herself that being neglected was far more proper and comfortable than to be overwhelmed with loving observances; and that the passionate affection, with which her very heart sometimes ached, was much better veiled under an aspect of coldness and reserve than allowed any natural outlet. She had read a different account of love in poetry and romance; but

poetry and romance were graceful misrepresentations.

These pathetic sophistries in so far failed to dominate the girl's righteous instincts that she took pains to keep them and the cause of them to herself. She would have given the world for a confidant and a counsellor; but she would not sacrifice a jot of her maidenly pride for all the counsellors and confidants in the world. And again, it hurt her pride to feel that she was concealing anything; and the only way out of this dilemma was to conceal from herself that concealment. A naturally sincere soul manages such refinements painfully; and Mary pulled to pieces her mental serenity and self-respect, in order to get materials for the construction of her factitious happiness.

Now when Aunt Sophia, in her artless and impulsive way, took to describing the ardour and chivalries of her own love affair, she touched her niece in a tender spot; for certainly Sebastian had never displayed the frenzy of devotion that Joshua was credited with; and Mary's chief sustaining hope all along had been that all report of such frenzy was mere caricature, and never by any means matter of actual fact. But if what Aunt Sophia said were true, or anything like the truth, how should Sebastian be vindicated? Not that a Joshua or a Selim, or twenty thousand times both of them, could have realised to her that vision which rose before her as she leant upon the old sundial in the starlit garden. No; but if a trumpety Joshua or Selim could so devote themselves, then she knew a man whose ardour ought to be to theirs as is the sun to a candle. What was the logical issue of this deduction?

Mary raised her pale face, and the hands that lay in her lap clasped each other so tightly that the amethyst of her engagement ring bit the flesh. Her lips were dry, and her eyes strained and bright.

"My love, shall I insult you with a doubt?" she whispered. She moved her hands and arms apart with a slight but powerful gesture. "The devil tempted me! I know you love me better than I love you."

She arose after this, and walked up and down the fern-shadowed pathway that extended the length of the conservatory. She felt tremulous and tired, yet restless. At last she thought, with relief, of her intended expedition to Cedarhurst. How long had she been sitting here? It was

already late, perhaps. Before going in she cast a glance towards the park through the glass door that gave in that direction. A slender black figure was advancing swiftly along the path, with his face bent towards the ground, and a stout walking-stick swinging in his hand. It was the Reverend Arthur Strome himself, appearing as if in answer to her thought.

OLD ENGLISH TRAVELLERS IN RUSSIA.

THE collections of worthy Hakluyt are a perfect treasury of information of voyages, travels, and adventures. A society bearing his name and inspired by his example—the Hakluyt Society—from time to time publishes similar collections, enriched with valuable annotation. Mr. Bond, the newly-appointed keeper of printed books in the British Museum, has edited a narrative of one of the early travellers in Russia. There are several of those travellers whose narratives are replete with interest. We propose to bring together some interesting notes from writings contained both in Hakluyt's collection and those published by the Hakluyt Society. In these old writings we find some interesting touches of personal adventures, some curious and little-known passages of English history, and we shall all the better be able to understand the ways of the Russian people at the present time if we know their antecedents.

It is about the middle of the sixteenth century that we hear of the great Muscovite Company, and of the doings of their captains and mariners. We may combine some of the more scattered notices before we proceed to the regular narratives. One worthy captain goes so far north as Lappia. "There came aboard us certain Lappians in a boat to the number of sixteen persons, and amongst them there were two wenches, and some of them could speak the Russe tongue. They told me they had been to seek meate among the rocks, saying: 'If we get no meate we eat none.' I saw them eat rock weeds as eagerly as a cow doeth grass when she is hungry. I saw them eat fowls' eggs raw, and the young birds also that were in the eggs." We think it best to modernise the spelling, although the Vandyke looks best in its ancient frame. Then one Mr. Anthony Jenkinson, sent on an embassy to the czar himself, gives an account of his

reception and entertainment by that potentate: "The emperor sent me divers bowls of wine and mead, and many dishes from his own hand, which were brought me by a duke, and my table served all in gold and silver. When dinner was ended, the emperor called me by name, and gave me drink with his own hand, and so I departed to my lodging. The emperor never putteth morsel of meat in his mouth but he first blesseth it himself, and in like manner as often as he drinketh, for after his manner he is very religious."

Some of his accounts of the old customs of the Russians are very amusing, and are corroborated by other travellers. Their curious religious customs have never greatly varied. At the present day nearly every Russian family has its *Ikön*, which is a picture, with something of an image interwoven with it. For instance, there is the picture of a saint in a household often enough at the present day, with a metallic aureole affixed to it. Our old traveller asserts that the common Russians took their images for gods. Even then their priests were married; but when the wife died the priest was not permitted to marry again. The account of their baptisms is very quaint. There is a table put into the middle of the church, "and on it an earthen pot, full of warm water, about the which the godfathers and godmothers settle themselves; then the clerk giveth unto every one of them a small wax candle burning; then cometh the priest, and beginneth to say certain words, which the godfathers and godmothers must answer word for word, among the which is that the child shall forsake the devil, and as that word is pronounced they must all spit at the word as often as it is repeated."

Their marriage customs are highly curious. "When there is love between the parties, the man sendeth unto the woman a small chest, wherein is a whip, needles, thread, silk, linen cloths; thereby giving her to understand that, if she does offend, she must be beaten by the whip; by the needles, thread, cloth, that she should apply herself diligently to sew," &c. After the wedding "they begin to drink, and first the woman drinketh to the man, and, when he hath drunk, he letteth the cup fall to the ground, hastening immediately to tread upon it, and so doth she; and whether of them tread first upon it must have the victory, and must be master at all times after." He reports

that the women sew well and embroider excellently. The husband is bound to find his wife in cosmetics, of which the wives make inordinate use "without any shame. I cannot so well liken them as to a miller's wife, for they look as though they were beaten about the face with a bag of meal, but their eyebrows they colour as black as jet." "The Russians do not have the credit of treating their wives in the best way. They consider that it is within their rights to administer personal castigation, and if the castigation is not administered, the wives consider that they have lost their hold upon the affections of the husband. For some days after the marriage the bride must not be heard to speak, save certain few words at the table, in a set form, with great manners and reverence to the bridegroom." If she behave herself otherwise, it is a great prejudice to her credit and life ever afterwards, and will be highly disliked of the bridegroom himself, who will probably administer personal correction.

Baron Heberstein gives a case where a Russianised German pushed the doctrine to its extreme logical consequences. "There is at Moscow a certain German, a blacksmith, named Jordar, who married a Russian woman. After she had lived some time with her husband, she one day thus lovingly addressed him: 'Why is it, my dearest husband, that you do not love me?' The husband replied: 'I do love you, passionately.' 'I have, as yet,' said she, 'received no proof of your love.' The husband enquired what proofs she desired. Her reply was: 'You have never beaten me!' 'Really,' said the husband, 'I did not think that blows were proofs of love; but, however, I will not fail even in this respect.' And so not long after he beat her most cruelly, and confessed to me that after that process his wife showed him much greater affection. So he repeated the exercise frequently; and finally, while I was still at Moscow, cut off her head and her legs."

Hakluyt gives an account of six expeditions which were sent from England to Russia. In the days of Ivan the Terrible, whose frightful atrocities suggest the charitable idea that he must have been mad, and of Queen Elizabeth, there was a great tendency to draw close bonds between England and Russia. England wanted the monopoly of the Russian trade, and Russia wanted the alliance of a great maritime power. The Hakluyt Society

takes up the narratives where Hakluyt leaves off, supplementing their information, and has disinterred various state papers and curious biographies. One Horsey was a clerk in the service of the Russian Company in Russia, and Ivan employed him as an agent to proceed to England. He wanted to marry an English lady; and he even aspired to the great Elizabeth herself. It was resolved that the Lady Mary Hastings, the queen's own niece, might probably prove a suitable match for the czar. It was quite true that the czar laboured under the trifling disadvantage of being married already; but he hastened to explain that his wife was not of royal birth, and he was entirely prepared to repudiate her. Lady Mary got the nickname among her friends of Empress of Muscovie. On the whole, however, she was not satisfied with "the tricks and manners" of her imperial admirer. She persuaded Queen Elizabeth to allow her to decline the dangerous honour. Ivan got into a terrible passion because Queen Elizabeth did not meet his wishes. He entirely lost any good manners which he might have been supposed to possess, and told the ambassador "that he did not reckon the Queen of England to be his fellow, for there are that are her betters." The ambassador manfully answered that "the queen, his mistress, was as great a prince as ever was in Christendom, equal to him that thought himself the greatest, well able to defend herself against his malice whosoever."

Besides the narrative of Horsey we have a narrative by one Giles Fletcher. He bears a name illustrious in English literature, being the father of Phineas Fletcher, the author of *The Purple Island*; and his brother, Bishop of London, was the father of John Fletcher, the illustrious dramatist. He acted as ambassador between the times of Horsey's employments and in several ways they are found together. He published a narrative, or book, about Russia, which the Russian Company caused to be suppressed on account of its plain-speaking. It is this book which the Hakluyt Society has resuscitated. Fletcher thought himself well out of a lion's den when he got back to London; "for the poets cannot fancy Ulysses more glad to be come out of the den of Polyphemus than he was to be rid out of the power of such a barbarous prince." Old Fuller perpetrates the curious bull of saying that, if the czar had cut Fletcher's head off, Fletcher

would in vain have sought for any redress. It is very difficult to see how he could have sought for any redress at all if his head had been taken off. Giles Fletcher loved Russia in the summer. "You shall see such a new hue and face of a country, the woods—for the most part which are all of fir and birch—so fresh and so sweet; the pastures and meadows so green and well-grown—and that upon the sudden; such variety of flowers, such noise of birds—specially of nightingales, that seem to be more loud and of a more variable note than in other countries, that a man shall not lightly travel in a more pleasant countrie."

But however pleased he may be with the country, he gives a frightful account of misgovernment and cruelty. The law of debtor and creditor was as bad as the old Roman law, which allowed the debtor to be cut up bodily by his creditors. If the alleged debt were only for a sixpence the debtor was chained leg, arms, and neck; if the case were given against the debtor, he was daily cudgelled about the shins and calves by an officer till the money was paid. "You shall see forty or fifty stand together all on a row, and their shins thus becudgelled and beasted every morning with a piteous cry." If the debt is not paid after a year's cudgelling, he, his wife, and his children, and all that he has, are sold. Death, with shocking varieties of suffering, was inflicted for all sorts of criminal offences; by the knout, by torture, by roasting, hanging, beheading. "But, for the most part, the prisoners that are condemned in summer are kept for the winter, to be knockt on the head and put under the ice." This was the case only with the poor serf. If a lord killed his servant "little or nothing is said unto him, at the most only a small fine." With regard to other crimes, "if a murder or theft be committed, peradventure he shall be imprisoned at the emperor's pleasure." He gives a wretched report of the life of the people: "They make no account of the life of a man. You shall have a man robbed sometimes in the very streets of their towns, if he go late in the evening, and yet no man to come forth out of his doors to rescue him, though he hear him cry out."

Fletcher gives a curious account of the emperor's way of celebrating holy days. His favourite amusement was to watch a bear-hunt, that is, a fight between bears and bear-hunters. "But many times these

hunters come short, and are either slain or miserably torn with the teeth and talents [i.e. talons] of the fierce beast. If the party quit himself well in this fight with the bear, he is carried to drink at the emperor's cellar door, where he drinketh himself drunk for the honour of Hospodar. And this is his reward for adventuring his life for the emperor's pleasure. When it draweth towards bedtime his priest sayeth certain prayers; and then the emperor blesseth and crosseth himself as in the morning, and so goeth to his bed." Fletcher at first found himself treated cavalierly, but after the defeat of the Spanish Armada he experienced great politeness.

Sir Jerome Horsey appears to have possessed a great deal of versatility of character. Passing through Poland he appeared at court in the disguise of one of his own servants, and when he was detected everybody took it pleasantly. Horsey describes the last days of that terrible old tyrant the Emperor Ivan. He sent for sixty witches out of the north countries, where there was great store. The dying man pointed out his jewels to the courtiers, and told them of the hidden virtues of his jewels, diamond, jasper, and sapphire. Horsey speaks of his reign as the "smothering time of tyranny." He gives an account of the splendid cheer which was afforded him in one of his embassies. They sent him for his provision, "twenty live sheep, twenty live oxen and bullocks, six hundred hens, forty fitches of bacon, two milch kine, two goats, ten fresh salmon, forty gallons of aqua porter (beer), one hundred gallons of mead, two hundred gallons of beer, a thousand loaves of white, three score bushels of meal, two thousand eggs, and a store of garlic and onions." Horsey was glad, however, to get away from his embassy, and, moreover, he was "betrothed to an honest gentleman's daughter of Buckinghamshire."

We have a great kindness for Horsey. He was a thorough Englishman. He married the honest gentleman's daughter, who was aunt to the great John Hampden, and we trust lived happy ever afterwards. He declares that all the known nations and kingdoms of the world are not comparable for happiness to "this thrice blessed nation and angelical kingdom of Canaan"—our England. He was a Member of Parliament in the reign of James the First, and survived into the earlier years of Charles

the First. In the Grenville Library of the British Museum there is a rare Slavonic Bible, with an inscription in Horsey's own handwriting.

VIXEN.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," &c. &c.

CHAPTER XLV. WEDDING BELLS.

VIXEN had been more than a year in the island of Jersey. She had lived her lonely and monotonous existence, and made no moan. It was a dreary exile; but it seemed to her that there was little else for her to do in life but dawdle through the long slow days, and bear the burden of living; at least until she came of age, and was independent, and could go where she pleased. Then there would be the wide world for her to wander over, instead of this sea-girdled garden of Jersey. She had reasons of her own for so quietly submitting to this joyless life. Mrs. Winstanley kept her informed of all that was doing in Hampshire, and even at the Queen Anne house at Kensington. She knew that Roderick Vawdrey's wedding-day was fixed for the first of August. Was it not better that she should be far away, hidden from her small world, while those marriage bells were ringing across the darkening beech-woods?

Her sacrifice had not been vain. Her lover had speedily forgotten that brief madness of last midsummer, and had returned to his allegiance. There had been no cloud upon the loves of the plighted cousins. If there had been, Mrs. Winstanley would have known all about it. Her letters told only of harmonious feeling and perpetual sunshine.

"Lady Mabel is looking prettier than ever," she wrote, in the last week of July; "that ethereal loveliness which I so much admire. Her waist cannot be more than eighteen inches. I cannot find out who makes her dresses, but they are exquisitely becoming to her; though, for my own part, I do not think the style equal to Theodore's. But then I always supplemented Theodore's ideas with my own suggestions.

"I hear that the trousseau is something wonderful. The lingerie is in quite a new style; a special make of linen has been introduced at Bruges on purpose for the occasion, and I have heard that the loom is to be broken and no more made. But this is perhaps exaggeration. The lace

has all been made in Buckinghamshire, from patterns a hundred years old—very quaint and pretty. There is an elegant simplicity about everything, Mrs. Scobel tells me, which is very charming. The costumes for the Norwegian tour are heather-coloured waterproof cloth, with stitched borders, plain to the last degree, but with a chic that redeems their plainness.

"Conrad and I received an early invitation to the wedding. He will go; but I have refused, on the ground of ill-health. And, indeed, my dear Violet, this is no idle excuse. My health has been declining ever since you left us. I was always a fragile creature, as you know, even in your dear papa's time; but of late the least exertion has made me tremble like a leaf. I bear up, for Conrad's sake. He is so anxious and unhappy when he sees me suffer, and I am glad to spare him anxiety.

"Your old friend, Mr. Vawdrey, looks well and happy, but I do not see much of him. Believe me, dear, you acted well and wisely in leaving home when you did. It would have been a dreadful thing if Lady Mabel's engagement had been broken off on account of an idle flirtation between you and Rorie. It would have left a stain upon your name for life. Girls do not think of these things. I'm afraid I flirted a little myself when I was first out, and admiration was new to me; but I married so young that I escaped some of the dangers you have had to pass through.

"Roderick is making considerable improvements and alterations at Briarwood. He is trying to make the house pretty—I fear an impossible task. There is a commonplace tone about the building that defies improvement. The orchid-houses at Ashbourne are to be taken down and removed to Briarwood. The collection has been increasing ever since Lady Jane Vawdrey's death, and is now one of the finest in England. But to my mind the taste is a most foolish one. Dear Conrad thinks me extravagant for giving sixty guineas for a dress—what might he not think if I gave as much for a single plant? Lord Mallow is staying at Ashbourne for the wedding. His success in the House of Commons has made him quite a lion. He called and took tea with me the other day. He is very nice. Ah, my dearest Violet, what a pity you could not like him! It would have been such a splendid match for you, and would have made Conrad and me so proud and happy."

Vixen folded the letter with a sigh. She was sitting in her favourite spot in the neglected garden, the figs ripening above her among their broad ragged leaves, and the green slopes and valleys lying beneath her—orchards and meadows and pink homesteads—under a sultry summer haze.

The daughter was not particularly alarmed by her mother's complaint of declining health. It was that old cry of "wolf," which Violet had heard ever since she could remember.

"Poor mamma!" she said to herself, with a half-pitying tenderness; "it has always been her particular vanity to fancy herself an invalid; and yet no doctor has ever been able to find out anything amiss. She ought to be very happy now, poor dear; she has the husband of her choice, and no rebellious daughter to make the atmosphere stormy. I must write to Mrs. Scobel, and ask if mamma is really not quite so well as when I left home."

And then Vixen's thoughts wandered away to Rorie, and the alterations that were being made at Briarwood. He was preparing a bright home for his young wife, and they would be very happy together, and it would be as if Violet had never crossed his path.

"But he was fond of me, last midsummer twelvemonth," thought Vixen, half seated, half reclining against a grassy bank, with her hands clasped above her head, and her open book flung aside upon the long grass, where the daisies and dandelions grew in such wild abundance. "Yes, he loved me dearly then, and would have sacrificed interest, honour, all the world, for my sake. Can he forget those days, when they are thus ever present to my mind? He seemed more in love than I: yet, a little year, and he is going to be married. Have men no memories? I do not believe that he loves Lady Mabel any better than he did a year ago, when he asked me to be his wife. But he has learnt wisdom; and he is going to keep his word, and to be owner of Briarwood and Ashbourne, and a great man in the county. I suppose it is a glorious destiny."

In these last days of July a strange restlessness had taken possession of Violet Tempest. She could not read or occupy herself in any way. Those long rambles about the island; to wild precipices looking down on peaceful bays; to furzy hills where a few scattered sheep were her sole companions; to heathery steeps that were

craggy and precipitous and dangerous to climb, and so had a certain fascination for the lonely wanderer—those rambles, which had been her chief resource and solace until now, had suddenly lost their charm. She dawdled in the garden, or roamed restlessly from the garden to the orchard, from the orchard to the sloping meadow, where Miss Skipwith's solitary cow, last representative of a once well-stocked farm, browsed in a dignified seclusion. The days were slow, and oh, how lengthy! and yet there was a fever in Vixen's blood which made it seem to her as if time were hurrying on at a break-neck pace.

"The day after to-morrow he will be married," she said to herself, on the morning of the thirtieth. "By this time on the day after to-morrow the bride will be putting on her wreath of orange-blossoms, and the church will be decorated with flowers, and there will be a flutter of expectation in all the little villages from one end of the Forest to the other. A duke's daughter is not married every day in the year. Ah me! there will not be an earthquake, or anything to prevent the wedding, I daresay. No; I feel sure that all things are going smoothly. If there had been a hitch of any kind, mamma would have written to tell me about it."

Miss Skipwith was not a bad person to live with in a time of secret trouble such as this. She was so completely wrapped up in her grand scheme of reconciliation for all the creeds, that she was utterly blind to any small individual tragedy that might be enacted under her nose. Those worn cheeks and haggard eyes of Vixen's attracted no attention from her, as they sat opposite to each other at the sparsely-furnished breakfast-table, in the searching summer light.

She had allowed Violet perfect liberty, and had been too apathetic to be unkind. Having tried her hardest to interest the girl in Swedenborg, or Luther, or Calvin, or Mahomet, or Brahma, or Confucius, and having failed ignominiously in each attempt, she had dismissed all idea of companionship with Violet from her mind, and had given her over to her own devices.

"Poor child," she said to herself, "she is not unamiable, but she is utterly mindless. What advantages she might have derived from intercourse with me, if she had possessed a receptive nature! But my highest gifts are thrown away upon her. She will go through life in lamentable ignorance of all that is of deepest

import in man's past and future. She has no more intellect than Baba."

Baba was the Persian cat, the silent companion of Miss Skipwith's studious hours.

So Violet roamed in and out of the house in this languid weather, and took up a book only to throw it down again, and went out to the court-yard to pat Argus, and strolled into the orchard and leaned listlessly against an ancient apple-tree, with her loose hair glistening in the sunshine—just as if she were posing herself for a pre-Raphaelite picture—and no one took any heed of her goings and comings.

She was supremely lonely. Even looking forward to the future—when she would be of age and well off, and free to do what she liked with her life—she could see no star of hope. Nobody wanted her. She stood quite alone, amidst a strange unfriendly world.

"Except poor old McCroke, I don't think there is a creature who cares for me; and even her love is tepid," she said to herself.

She had kept up a regular correspondence with her old governess since she had been in Jersey, and had developed to Miss McCroke the scheme of her future travels. They were to see everything strange and rare and beautiful that was to be seen in the world.

"I wonder if you would much mind going to Africa?" she wrote, in one of her frank girlish letters. "There must be something new in Africa. One would get away from the beaten ways of Cockney tourists, and one would escape the dreary monotony of a table d'hôte. There is Egypt for us to do; and you, who are a walking encyclopædia, will be able to tell me all about the Pyramids, and Pompey's Pillar, and the Nile. If we got tired of Africa we might go to India. We shall be thoroughly independent. I know you are a good sailor; you are not like poor mamma, who used to suffer tortures in crossing the Channel."

There was a relief in writing such letters as these, foolish though they might be. That idea of distant wanderings with Miss McCroke was the one faint ray of hope offered by the future—not a star, assuredly, but at least a farthing candle. The governess answered in her friendly matter-of-fact way. She would like much to travel with her dearest Violet. The life would be like heaven after her present drudgery in finishing the Misses Pontifex,

who were stupid and supercilious. But Miss McCroke was doubtful about Africa. Such a journey would be a fearful undertaking for two unprotected females. To have a peep at Algiers and Tunis, and even to see Cairo and Alexandria, might be practicable; but anything beyond that Miss McCroke thought wild and adventurous. Had her dear Violet considered the climate, and the possibility of being taken prisoners by black people, or even devoured by lions? Miss McCroke begged her dear pupil to read Livingstone's travels, and the latest reports of the Royal Geographical Society, before she gave any further thought to Africa.

The slowest hours, days the most wearisome, long nights that know not sleep, must end at last. The first of August dawned, a long streak of red light in the clear grey east. Vixen saw the first glimmer as she lay wide awake in her big old bed, staring through the curtainless window to the far sea-line, above which the morning sky grew red.

"Hail, Rorie's wedding-day!" she cried, with a little hysterical laugh; and then she buried her face in the pillow and sobbed aloud—sobbed as she had not done till now, through all her weary exile.

There had been no earthquake; this planet we live on had not rolled backward in space; all things in life pursued their accustomed course, and time had ripened into Roderick Vawdrey's wedding-day.

"I did think something would happen," said Vixen piteously. "It was foolish, weak, mad to think so. But I could not believe he would marry anyone but me. I did my duty, and I tried to be brave and steadfast. But I thought something would happen."

A weak lament from the weak soul of an undisciplined girl. The red light grew and glowed redder in the east, and then the yellow sun shone through grey drifting clouds, and the new day was born. Slumber and Violet had parted company for the last week. Her mind had been too full of images; the curtain of sleep would not hide them. Frame and mind were both alike worn out, as she lay in the broadening light, lonely, forsaken, unpitied, bearing her great sorrow, just as she must have borne the toothache, or any other physical pain.

She rose at seven, feeling unspeakably tired, dressed herself slowly, thinking of Lady Mabel. What an event her rising and dressing would be this morning—

the flurried maids, the indulgent mother; the pure white garments, glistening in the tempered sunlight; the luxurious room, with its subdued colouring, its perfume of freshly-cut flowers; the dainty breakfast-tray, on a table by an open window; the shower of congratulatory letters, and the last delivery of wedding gifts. Vixen could imagine the scene, with its every detail.

And Roderick, what of him? She could not so easily picture the companion of her childhood on this fateful morning of his life. She could not imagine him happy; she dared not fancy him miserable. It was safer to make a great effort, and shut that familiar figure out of her mind altogether.

Oh, what a dismal ceremony the eight-o'clock breakfast, tête-à-tête with Miss Skipwith, seemed on this particular morning! Even that preoccupied lady was constrained to notice Violet's exceeding pallor.

"My dear, you are ill!" she exclaimed. "Your face is as white as a sheet of paper, and your eyes have dark rings round them."

"I am not ill, but I have been sleeping badly of late."

"My dear child, you need occupation; you want an aim. The purposeless life you are leading must result badly. Why can you not devise some pursuit to fill your idle hours? Far be it from me to interfere with your liberty; but I confess that it grieves me to see youth, and no doubt some measure of ability, so wasted. Why do you not strive to continue your education? Self-culture is the highest form of improvement. My books are at your disposal."

"Dear Miss Skipwith, your books are all theological," said Vixen wearily, "and I don't care for theology. As for my education, I am not utterly neglecting it. I read Schiller till my eyes ache."

"One shallow German poet is not the beginning and end of education," replied Miss Skipwith. "I should like you to take larger views of woman's work in the world."

"My work in the world is to live quietly, and not to trouble anyone," said Vixen, with a sigh.

She was glad to leave Miss Skipwith to her books, and to wander out into the sunny garden, where the figs were ripening or dropping half-ripened amongst the neglected grass, and the clustering bloom of the hydrangeas was as blue as the

summer sky. There had been an unbroken interval of sultry weather—no rain, no wind, no clouds, only endless sunshine.

"If it would hail, or blow, or thunder," sighed Vixen, with her hands clasped above her head, "the change might be some small relief to my feelings; but this everlasting brightness is too dreadful. What a lying world it is, and how Nature smiles at us when our hearts are aching. Well, I suppose I ought to wish the sunshine to last till after Rorie's wedding; but I don't, I don't, I don't! If the heavens were to darken, and forked lightnings to cleave the black vault, I should dance for joy. I should hail the storm, and cry, 'This is sympathy!'"

And then she flung herself face downwards on the grass and sobbed, as she had sobbed on her pillow that morning.

"It rends my heart to know we are parted for ever," she said. "Oh, why did I not say Yes that night in the fir-plantation? The chance of lifelong bliss was in my hand, and I let it go. It would have been less wicked to give way then, and accept my happy fate, than to suffer these evil feelings that are gnawing at my heart to-day—vain rage, cruel hatred of the innocent!"

The wedding bells must be ringing by this time. She fancied she could hear them. Yes, the summer air seemed alive with bells. North, south, east, west, all round the island, they were ringing madly, with tuneful marriage peal. They beat upon her brain. They would drive her mad. She tried to stop her ears, but then those wedding chimes seemed ringing inside her head. She could not shut them out. She remembered how the joy-bells had haunted her ears on Rorie's twenty-first birthday—that day which had ended so bitterly, in the announcement of the engagement between the cousins. Yes; that had been her first real trouble. How well she remembered her despair and desolation that night, the rage that possessed her young soul.

"And I was little more than a child, then," she said to herself. "Surely I must have been born wicked. My dear father was living then; and even the thought of his love did not comfort me. I felt myself abandoned and alone in the world. How idiotically fond I must have been of Rorie! Ever so many years have come and gone, and I have not cured myself of this folly. What is there in him that I should care for him?"

She got up from the grass, plucked herself out of that paroxysm of mental pain which came too near lunacy, and began to walk slowly round the garden-paths, reasoning with herself, calling womanly pride to the rescue.

"I hate myself for this weakness," she protested dumbly. "I did not think I was capable of it. When I was a child, and was taken to the dentist, did I ever whine and howl like vulgar-minded children? No! I braced myself for the ordeal, and bore the pain as my father's child ought."

She walked quickly to the house, burst into the parlour, where Miss Skipwith was sitting at her desk, the table covered with open volumes, over which flowers of literature the student roved, bee-like, collecting honey for her intellectual hive.

"Please, Miss Skipwith, will you give me some books about Buddha?" said Vixen, with an alarming suddenness. "I am quite of your opinion: I ought to study. I think I shall go in for theology."

"My dearest child!" cried the ancient damsel, enraptured. "Thank Heaven! the seed I have sown has germinated at last. If you are once inspired with the desire to enter that vast field of knowledge, the rest will follow. The flowers you will find by the wayside will lure you onward, even when the path is stony and difficult."

"I suppose I had better begin with Buddha," said Vixen, with a hard and resolute manner that scarcely seemed like the burning desire for knowledge newly kindled in the breast of a youthful student. "That is beginning at the beginning, is it not?"

"No, my dear. In comparison with the priesthood of Egypt, Buddha is contemptibly modern. If we want the beginning of things, we must revert to Egypt, that cradle of learning and civilisation."

"Then let me begin with Egypt!" cried Vixen impatiently. "I don't care a bit how I begin. I want occupation for my mind."

"Did I not say so?" exclaimed Miss Skipwith, full of ardent welcome for the neophyte whose steps had been so tardy in approaching the shrine. "That pallor, those haggard eyes, are indications of a troubled mind; and no mind can be free from trouble when it lacks an object. We create our own sorrows."

"Yes; we are wretched creatures!" cried Vixen passionately; "the poorest examples of machinery in all this varied

universe. Look at that cow in your orchard, her dull placid life, inoffensive, useful, asking nothing but a fertile meadow and a sunny day to fill her cup with happiness. Why did the great Creator make the lower animals exempt from sorrow, and give us such an infinite capacity for grief and pain? It seems hardly fair."

"My dear, our Creator gave us minds, and the power of working out our own salvation," replied Miss Skipwith. "Here are half-a-dozen volumes. In these you will find the history of Egyptian theology, from the golden age of the god Râ to the dark and troubled period of Persian invasion. Some of these works are purely philosophical. I should recommend you to read the historical volumes first. Make copious notes of what you read, and do not hesitate to refer to me when you are puzzled."

"I am afraid that will be very often," said Vixen, piling up the books in her arms with a somewhat hopeless air. "I am not at all clever, but I want to employ my mind."

She carried the books up to her bedroom, and arranged them on a stout oak table, which Mrs. Doddery had found for her. She opened her desk, and put a quire of paper ready for any notes she might be tempted to make; and then she began, steadily and laboriously, with a dry-as-dust history of ancient Egypt.

Oh, how her poor head ached as the summer noontide wore on, and the bees hummed in the garden below, and the distant waves danced gaily in the sunlight; and the knowledge that the bells were really ringing at Ashbourne could not be driven from her mind! How the Shepherd Kings, and the Pharaohs, and the comparatively modern days of Joseph and his brethren, and the ridiculously recent era of Moses, passed, like dim shifting shadows, before her mental vision! She retraced her steps in that dreary book again and again, patiently forcing her mind to the uncongenial task.

"I will not be such a slave as to think of him all this long summer day," she said to herself. "I will think of the god Râ, and the lotus-flowers, and the Red Nile, and the Green Nile, and all this wonderful land where I am going to take dear old McCroke by-and-by."

She read on till dinner-time, only pausing to scribble rapid notes of the dates and names and facts which would not stand steadily in her whirling brain; and then

she went down to the parlour, no longer pale, but with two hectic spots on her cheeks, and her eyes unnaturally bright.

"Ah," ejaculated Miss Skipwith delightedly; "you look better already. There is nothing like severe study for bracing the nerves."

Violet talked about Egypt all dinner-time, but she ate hardly anything, and that hectic flush upon her cheeks grew more vivid as she talked.

"To think that, after the seed lying dormant all this time, it should have germinated at last with such sudden vigour," mused Miss Skipwith. "The poor girl is talking a good deal of nonsense; but that is only the exuberance of a newly-awakened intellect."

Vixen went back to the Egyptians directly after dinner. She toiled along the arid road with an indomitable patience. Her ideas of Egypt had hitherto been of the vaguest. Vast plains of barren sand, a pyramid or two, Memnon's head breathing wild music in the morning sunshine, crocodiles, copper-coloured natives, and Antony and Cleopatra. These things were about as much as Miss McCroke's painstaking tuition had implanted in her pupil's mind. And here, without a shadow of vocation, this poor ignorant girl was poring over the driest details that ever interested the scholar. The mysteries of the triple language, the Rosetta Stone, Champollion—tout le long de la rivière. Was it any wonder that her head ached almost to agony, and that the ringing of imaginary wedding-bells sounded distractingly in her ears.

She worked on till tea-time, and was too engrossed to hear the bell, which clanged lustily for every meal in the orderly household: a bell whose clamour was somewhat too much for the repast it heralded.

This evening Vixen did not hear the bell, inviting her to weak tea and bread-and-butter. The ringing of those other bells obscured the sound. She was sitting with her book before her, but her eyes fixed on vacancy, when Miss Skipwith, newly interested in her charge, came to enquire the cause of her delay. The girl looked at her languidly, and seemed slow to understand what she said.

"I don't care for any tea," she replied at last. "I would rather go on with the history. It is tremendously interesting, especially the hieroglyphics. I have been trying to make them out. It is so nice to

know that a figure like a chopper means a god, and that a goose with a black ball above his back means Pharaoh, son of the sun. And then the tables of dynasties: can anything be more interesting than those? It makes one's head go round just a little at first, when one has to grope backwards through so many centuries, but that's nothing."

"My dear, you are working too hard. It is foolish to begin with such impetuosity. A fire that burns so fiercely will soon exhaust itself. Festina lente. We must hasten slowly, if we want to make solid progress. Why, my poor child, your forehead is burning. You will read yourself into a fever."

"I think I am in a fever already," said Vixen.

Miss Skipwith was unusually kind. She insisted upon helping her charge to undress, and would not leave her till she was lying quietly in bed. She was going to draw down the blinds, but against this Vixen protested vehemently.

"Pray leave me the sky," she cried; "it is something to look at through the long blank night. The stars come and go, and the clouds are always changing. I believe I should go mad if it were not for the sky."

Poor Miss Skipwith felt seriously uneasy. The first draught from the fountain of knowledge had evidently exercised an intoxicating effect upon Violet Tempest. It was as if she had been taking opium or hashish. The girl's brain was affected.

"You have studied too long," she said. "This must not occur again. I feel myself responsible to your parents for your health."

"To my parents," echoed Vixen, with a sudden sigh; "I have only one, and she is happier in my absence than when I was with her. You need not be uneasy about me if I fall ill. No one will care. If I were to die no one would be sorry. I have no place in the world. No one will miss me."

"My dear, it is absolutely wicked to talk in this strain—just as you are developing new powers, an intellect which may make you a pillar and a landmark in your age."

"I don't want to be a pillar or a landmark," said Vixen impatiently. "I don't want to have my name associated with 'movements,' or to write letters to the Times. I should like to have been happy my own way."

She turned her back upon Miss Skipwith,

and lay so still that the excellent lady supposed she was dropping off to sleep.

"A good night's rest will restore her, and she will awake with renewed appetite for knowledge," she murmured benevolently, as she went back to her Swedenborgian studies.

HARD TIMES IN COTTONOPOLIS.

"HARD times, hard times, come again no more," was the touching refrain which was rolled towards me by four thousand voices as I entered the Free Trade Hall, Manchester, one night last January. It was the annual meeting of the Liberal Association. I had spent the whole of that day in visiting—in the company of a competent and experienced official—some of the most destitute streets, lanes, and courts of Manchester, in order that I might see for myself the nature and extent of the distress which unhappily then existed to an almost unprecedented degree in our midst. I had been in many strange nooks and corners of the city, and had witnessed many sorrowful sights, and had listened again and again to the same pitiful story of baffled endeavours for work and exhausted resources. I had talked in one denuded house after another with a score of haggard and almost hopeless men, who had trudged the shoes off their feet in the fruitless quest of employment. I had listened to the quiet lamentations of a crowd of half-clad women, whose pinched and care-worn faces and gaunt forms spoke volumes in support of the truth of the tales of abject poverty which were narrated to me, with grim monotony, in almost every house. I had seen bare-footed little children, huddled together, sobbing, with empty hands, by empty grates, amid the early gloom of that bleak January day. Footsore with my travels, and heartsore at the sorrow and the suffering which they had revealed, I am not ashamed to confess that I was moved almost to tears when I heard the great gathering in the Free Trade Hall singing, to the accompaniment of the majestic organ, a song to which my own experiences that day had lent an added pathos.

"Hard times" and Manchester have, indeed, been only too well acquainted this winter; and it is not too much to say that whenever the story of the recent distress in this city comes to be fully told, it will

reveal much of the same patient endurance on the one hand, and open-hearted generosity on the other, which were such striking characteristics of that memorable time when the Cotton Famine cast its dark shadow over the fortunes of Lancashire seventeen years ago. "Manchester men," without exception, are proud of the confidence shown in them by the mayor (Mr. Alderman Grundy) in his reply to the suggestion of the Lord Mayor of London that a Mansion House Fund should be instituted. "I beg to assure you," wrote back at once the mayor, "that this community is both able and willing to sustain whatever pressure it may have to bear. Whilst expressing gratitude for the proffered help, I venture to reply that, though the times through which we are passing are severe, Manchester can and will bear the strain." The confidence of the chief magistrate in the liberality of his fellow-citizens was amply justified by the remarkable and sustained benevolence, which was manifested by all grades and classes of the people so long as occasion demanded. Without the aid of either town's meetings or sensational appeals, the inhabitants of Manchester and Salford contributed, in the brief space of eight weeks, more than twenty-two thousand five hundred pounds. Some account of the particular method adopted in this locality, to baffle that savage wolf, "Starvation," may not be without interest to those who may yet have to cope on other fields with the attacks of the same relentless foe. The writer is indebted for the following facts to his position as a member of the executive committee for the relief, and also to repeated conversations on the subject with the able and energetic chief agent of the Manchester and Salford Provident Society, Mr. James Smith, the value of whose services during the recent crisis it would be impossible to overrate.

The distress began with the Arctic weather which set in all over the country in the opening days of December. The immediate result of the intense frost was to throw a number of men, engaged in every department of work, out of employment. The busy picks and spades of an army of navvies were arrested in a single night, as by magic, through an iron frost which rendered all out-of-doors work impracticable. The severity of the winter remained unabated during the month which followed; and as the Christmas holidays approached, the suffering was intensified by the annual "off time," which on this

occasion proved to be most inopportune. The large number of joiners who had not obtained work, since the recent disastrous strike in the building trade, increased the number of those who experienced in its full force the pitiless rigour of the season. Without a doubt, however, the chief cause of the distress was the unparalleled depression of the Manchester trade in almost all its departments. It would be incorrect to say that the recent distress has come upon the community unnoticed or without warning. Since the winter of 1874-5 business has gone from bad to worse, and, as a consequence, poverty and privation have been spreading through the community in ever-widening circles. The prolonged and ever-deepening depression of the staple trade in nearly all its forms has forced many large firms to discharge a considerable proportion of their employes, and to reduce the wages of those still retained. Hundreds of clerks, travellers, and warehousemen have consequently been thrown adrift on the world, many of whom are totally unfit for any avocation outside the narrow groove in which they formerly worked and prospered. Many a reluctant conscript in the forlorn army of the unemployed has found his way into its troubled ranks through no fault whatever of his, but simply because of a conspiracy of events, which it was impossible for him to forecast, much less to control.

Heart-breaking stories are current of the hundreds of experienced clerks—many of them really accomplished men—who have flocked to answer a single advertisement for a clerk at twenty-five shillings a week, whilst similar posts at even less remunerative wages have been eagerly and thankfully snapped up. Of course, not Manchester alone, but every manufacturing town and village in Lancashire has felt, and is still feeling, the prolonged pressure of bad times; but, at the same time, nowhere has the suffering been more universal and intense than amongst the crowded population of Cottonopolis itself. It is generally believed here that the prompt measures which were taken about the middle of December by the Manchester and Salford Provident Society, and the numerous gentlemen who came forward to assist in the administration of relief under its special fund, alone preserved the town from bread riots. When the question of relief was first mooted, it was considered desirable to employ the machinery of a society which had enjoyed the confidence of the district

for a period of forty-five years. The object of the Provident Society ever since its formation by a group of local philanthropists in March, 1833, has been threefold: to give temporary assistance to the deserving poor; to repress mendicancy; and to foster habits of economy and thrift amongst the operatives of Manchester and Salford. Its success in the last named department of its work is manifest from the fact that no less a sum than one hundred and fifty thousand pounds has been deposited and withdrawn, since the commencement of the society, in twenty penny banks which it has established in the most poverty-stricken parts of the city and adjacent borough. The office of the society, which though previously well-known, has risen this winter to much local celebrity, is situated in Queen Street, Deansgate, and that hitherto notorious quarter has largely benefited by its operations. Alarmed at the evidences of appalling poverty which their visitors reported, the committee of the Provident Society sent a deputation to the guardians of the poor; to consult with them as to the nature and extent of the distress, and the best means for its immediate relief. They were informed by one of the most experienced officials of the Salford Union, that never, during an intimate and every-day acquaintance with the poor of Manchester and Salford, which had extended over more than thirty years, had he witnessed such wide-spread and abject penury as during the opening days of December. Such men are not usually alarmists, and are perhaps the least likely of all to take an exaggerated view of the situation; it was therefore felt by the Provident Society that the work of relief must at once be undertaken without a moment's delay, and that on a scale unparalleled since the Cotton Famine. With most praiseworthy promptitude, on Wednesday, December 11th, a large warehouse in Windmill Street, adjoining the New Central Station, was obtained possession of; in three days it was roughly, though completely fitted up for the peculiar work of the society; and on Saturday, the 14th, six hundred applicants—out of a still larger number who passed its portals on this single day—obtained a much-needed relief. From that period till the end of February the dépôt in Windmill Street continued to be besieged every day by a crowd of poor people, who carried their credentials in their faces, eager to make preliminary application, or

else to receive relief on the strength of the tickets granted to them by the society's inspectors. In all cases, it need scarcely be said, the most stringent precautions were taken to prevent imposition, as well as to remove all temptations to it; and, considering the number of persons relieved, exceedingly few cases of abuse have come to light. Of course, in all periods of such distress, a good many of the "disagreeable elements of human character"—to quote the words of the Bishop of Manchester—are brought out; but it is quite as true, and ought not to be forgotten, that such periods bring likewise the revelation of much patient "heroism in humble life." The committee, at the outset, determined to limit as far as possible all opportunity for the exercise of deception; and the previous experience of the Provident Society's officials in the suppression of mendicancy helped materially to give immediate practical effect to such a decision. The committee all along were desirous of assisting to the utmost of their power, not only the respectable and industrious amongst the artisans, but also the many sufferers in the class immediately above them. At the same time they sedulously endeavoured to check the importunity of a class of people (unfortunately wider than any particular social grade) who, having brought misfortune upon themselves by improvidence, are usually the first to cry out for help. With this object in view members of the committee sat on alternate days, and received applications for relief. The particulars of each case having been duly inserted in books kept for the purpose, two tickets were then given to the applicant, who was directed to come again at noon on the following day. One of the tickets thus granted was the applicant's future "pass" into the office, and contained his name, address, number, and the letter under which his district of the town was classified. The other ticket he was told to take to his last employer, and present it, when he came the next day, with the signature and address of the master, and his answer to the following printed questions: Firstly, How long has the applicant been in your employ? Secondly, Why did he or she cease to be employed by you? Thirdly, Will you employ this person again? Fourthly, What did this person earn per week when in your employ? Fifthly, If now working, what have been the total earnings for the last four weeks? Meanwhile, the applicant's house

was visited by an official of the Provident Society, whose business it was to verify the statement he had made as to number of his family, cause of distress, total earnings, rent, &c., and to make further enquiries in the neighbourhood. The visitor's report and the employer's replies being considered satisfactory, the applicant received in tickets, negotiable at the Provident Society's stores, a week's relief for himself and family in accordance with the following scale: One person, three shillings and ninepence; two, five shillings; three, six shillings; four, eight shillings; five, nine shillings; six, ten shillings and sixpence; seven, twelve shillings; eight, thirteen shillings; nine, fourteen shillings. In no case whatever was money given; but the fullest value in flour, bacon, meal, rice, cheese, &c., was given for the tickets at the extensive stores opened by the society for the exchange of their own tickets in Mount Street. Tickets for coal and coke were also freely given; and occasionally blankets, sheets, shirts, petticoats, coats, and clogs. The bedding and wearing apparel were all marked "Lent," in order to check the temptation which might be offered to unscrupulous pawnbrokers to receive them. A huge soup-kitchen was opened in Windmill Street in the basement of the society's premises, and six hundred gallons of good and wholesome soup were frequently distributed in the course of a single day. Besides the central depot in Windmill Street, offices for relief were opened as follows: In the township of Hulme—which at the census of 1871 contained a population of seventy-four thousand seven hundred and thirty-one persons—four district committees distributed the relief; whilst other local committees superintended (in all cases under the control of the Windmill Street executive) the relief in Ancoats, Ardwick and Gorton, Salford (district), Pendleton, and Broughton. In no case whatever was an applicant relieved for more than four weeks without a fresh application on his part, and a renewed enquiry into his circumstances on the part of the committee; and in no case was an applicant relieved who either was, or had been, in receipt of help from the Guardians.

The whole work, from first to last, it may here be stated, was carried on with the hearty concurrence and co-operation both of the Manchester and the Salford Boards of Guardians. Every applicant was required to produce his rent-book, or other-

wise prove that he had lived in Manchester or Salford prior to the 1st of December. This latter regulation was found necessary in consequence of the large accession of tramps from all parts of the country, attracted to the spot in hope of relief from the special fund. Sewing-classes for women were opened in connection with the various local committees, and were freely attended by hundreds of destitute wives and mothers. In order to reach the many unemployed clerks and warehousemen who were known to be secretly in want, the following advertisement was placed at the head of the column "Situations Vacant," in the various Manchester papers: "Distress in Manchester and Salford. Families whose position makes them unwilling to make personal application for relief, are invited to state their cases by letter only, addressed to Box One hundred and sixty-two, G. P. O., Manchester. All applications must be accompanied by reference to last employer, and one or two respectable householders." In the Broughton and Pendleton districts special placards were also issued to the numerous clerks, &c., known to reside in those suburbs. The announcement thus made ran as follows: "The Relief Committee are anxious to be made confidentially acquainted with particulars of any needy and deserving cases in this district, having special reference to the more respectable class of persons who may have a disinclination, from sensitive feelings of honest pride, to make known their destitute condition. Every care will be taken to respect the scruples of the applicant; and, should the latter so desire, but not otherwise, an arrangement will willingly be made for affording the needful relief by way of loan, repayable to the Provident Society when circumstances improve. Applications are invited by letter, and applicants of this class are assured that every secrecy will be observed." By these means many cases of touching and most deserving poverty were brought to light, which would otherwise not have received the help which the public wished to place precisely in such hands. The work of the Provident Society, wide as it was, by no means covered the special efforts put forth to meet the distress. Many churches and chapels established soup-kitchens, or gave free dinners in their own school premises; whilst Mr. Alsop, the superintendent of the Wood Street Mission for Street Arabs, gave twelve hundred meals a week to poor

children, and distributed during the cold weather four thousand garments, and three thousand five hundred toys on Christmas Eve from Santa Claus. The toys came chiefly from the nurseries of the children of wealthy people in the suburbs; many of whom brought their little ones down through the darkness and the snow to see the poor gutter children rejoice over their unexpected treasures. During the height of the distress the relief cost upwards of three thousand pounds a week, but the people of Manchester were able to bear their own burden, and no outside appeal was ever made. The extent of the misery which prevailed, but which is happily immeasurably lessened now, may be perhaps judged from the fact that at the end of Christmas week no fewer than sixty-four thousand persons in Manchester and Salford were receiving relief either from the Provident Society's fund or from the Guardians. When it is remembered that at the very climax of the Cotton Famine sixty-nine thousand one hundred and forty persons was the largest number relieved in Manchester and Salford in one week, the reader will be able to judge for himself how nearly the recent distress in this great city approached to that awful time of suffering which seventeen years ago moved the common heart of two mighty nations to swift measures of relief.

MY LAND OF BEULAH.

A STORY IN FIFTEEN CHAPTERS. CHAPTER VIII.

I COULD not realise it.

Eulalie—my school-friend—the girl whom I had asked papa to help—his wife!

I have always counted jealousy the meanest of all passions, and I am glad to look back now and be able to say that not a shadow of its blighting influence once touched me in this sudden knowledge of a strange turn of fate.

But this very strangeness almost dazed me. The thought that papa could love me less, because he loved my beautiful Eulalie, never crossed my mind.

How perfect Eulalie would look as the mistress of Hazledene! How well her beauty would become the grand old rooms, and the terraces in the gardens, from whence you could catch a glimpse of a soft blue line of sea, and hear the faint far murmur of the waves upon the shore! How proud she would be of papa, and he of her, and I of both of them; but oh, how strange it all was! She was so

young—only three years and a half older than I, who had struck "fourteen o'clock," as Amy Ladbroke called it, since my school-friend and I parted, and, though feeling the weight of years upon my head in consequence, still realised that the world did not so reckon age, and would be ready to set me down as "rather young."

That Eulalie would be happy in the new life she had chosen I did not doubt; who, indeed, could be otherwise whose lot it was to be always with papa, the first object of his thought, and love, and care?

There would be no need now, I thought, sitting there in the library with my letter on my knee, to ask him about the serpent with the diamond eye; for would not it be his dear delight to give my friend all things she could wish for?

I knew how he had loved and mourned my mother; but that was long, long years ago. I was not jealous for her memory, for I knew his reverence and tenderness would ever surround the thought of her; and perhaps some day—you never know what odd things come to pass—I might—well—go away and leave papa—never loving him a bit the less, and yet loving someone else in a strange new way that was a dim and indistinct thing to me at present, but that in my mind took the shadowy semblance of Rebecca's love for Ivanhoe. Then I should be glad that he had found Eulalie, glad that his happiness was complete without my constant presence, though all the brighter for his ceaseless thought of me, and mine of him.

Then in a moment, like a snake from a basket of flowers, rose up one ugly thought.

Did I not know that of Eulalie—of my father's promised wife—that I could never tell? For if my lips were sealed before, they were doubly so now. What would he, with his high notions of a true gentleman's delicate sense of honour, say, if he knew that the woman he loved was capable of reading a letter that did not belong to her?

There are some people the spell of whose presence is so great, that while we are within reach of the sound of their voice, and the trick and manner of their smile and glance, we cannot judge them fairly—we cannot see clearly enough to set their wrong-doings in an open light, and weigh them in the balance.

Of these Eulalie was one.

I had, while she was near me, been more ready to condemn myself for harsh thoughts of her, than her for the base action that had called these thoughts into

being. But once free from the glamour of her marvellous beauty and potent charm, I had seen things in a truer light, and I knew that distrust must ever lurk underneath my love for her, deep and tender as it still was.

"Why he's old enough to be her father—almost her grandfather! Pahaw! don't talk to me, Sister Mary; I've no patience with such folly! The man's old enough to have better sense—and, besides, you know we can't be certain a bit——"

Thus far, in Miss Maria's clear, somewhat loud voice, I heard, and then my dear Miss Mary's softer tones answering:

"No, sister, we are certain of nothing; and therefore we have no right to take anything for granted. It is of that dear child I think."

The two ladies were crossing the hall; Miss Maria rattling her keys, a sure sign of irritation of spirit on her part. At that moment I almost hated her for the way she had spoken of papa; but there was a sore place in my heart that made Miss Mary's loving words touch me to the quick, and I had a sob in my throat as I sprang to the door to meet her.

"Child," she said; "Nell, my darling! this is strange news for you."

She sat down on a low couch by the fire, and I knelt beside her and threw my arms about her, holding her close as if I needed to cling to something just then.

"Here's a nice state of things," said Miss Maria, setting the straw boat down upon the table with a jerk that made the keys therein jump, as well it might. "I wish we'd never sent Eulalie to Mrs. Langley's. Such an idea! A girl that hadn't a respectable dress to her back when she came to us, and to think of her marrying Sir Charles Vansittart! Umph! set a beggar on horseback, and he'll—no—she'll——"

"Sister!" put in Miss Mary pleadingly, with an anxious look upon her face, as of one who didn't quite know what might come next.

Miss Maria only tossed her head, and was going to take up her parable again, when the other said softly:

"Remember how kind her mother was to poor dear Charley."

The words worked like a spell. Miss Maria's firm mouth softened, and she drew a deep breath.

"Yes," she said; "you are quite right to remind me, Sister Mary; 'her mother was very kind to poor dear Charley.'"

Kneeling by my dearest friend, and

looking from her to Miss Maria, and from Miss Maria back again to her, I tried to gauge the words of each; not succeeding very admirably, but, for all that, coming to the resolution of speaking certain bold words that craved for utterance.

"It seems to me," I said, trembling a good deal, but very determined for all that, "that papa is the best judge; and that for any of us to find fault with him for choosing anyone so beautiful and gentle as Eulalie to be his wife—is—wrong." Here my courage began to ooze out at my tingling finger-ends, and I added, with a sudden squeeze of the hand that held mine: "I'm sure he loves her very, very dearly, Miss Maria—who could help doing that?"

As I looked up into Miss Mary's face close above me, I saw the big tears shining in her eyes; and then all my wild excitement, all my strange feelings of the unreality of all things, all my fears about the shameful story told by the old mirror, found vent in a passionate burst of weeping, that scared Miss Maria from the room, and redoubled Miss Mary's tenderness to the child of her love.

I do not think papa could have been made otherwise than happy by the letter that I wrote in reply to the one telling me of his engagement to my friend. I should think Eulalie must have been pleased with the one (enclosed within it) that I sent to her. All the loving wishes for both that my heart held I tried to put into words, and I tried to let no faintest shadow of the one misgiving fall athwart the pages.

That night I had a strange dream. I seemed to be standing somewhere where the air blew chill, and made me tremble with its dank and icy touch. All about me was a lurid gloom, and the sound of bitter weeping. Then I looked downwards, and lo! crouching at my feet, was a child clothed in rags, and as I looked it raised a little, pitiful, woe-begone face, streaming with tears, to mine.

It may seem a strange thing for me to chronicle—a childish dream full of vague fear and dread; but I have cause to chronicle it, for in the time to come that dream-child came to me many times and oft, and ever as the harbinger of misfortune.

Always weeping; always dressed in rags that clung about its withered, shrunken limbs; always looking up at me with its wee, white, weary face!

What was it? Whence did it come? I cannot tell; but this much I know, that I have met with others besides myself who

have been subject to the strange recurrence of one weird dream ever boding ill.

Mrs. Langley, the wife of the rector of Hazledene, wrote delightedly of her young governess's good fortune. She had seen how it would be from the first, she said. Sir Charles Vansitart had always been a frequent visitor at the Rectory; but after Miss Le Breton's arrival few days passed without a visit from him, and he took to joining "the dear children" when out for a ramble on the shore in her care. Miss Le Breton had a wonderful gift for telling fairy tales, and in the hour "between the lights" she used to tell her little pupils the most lovely legends. At first she was very shy when Mrs. Langley, the rector, and Sir Charles joined the audience; but a little gentle encouragement soon set her at her ease, and the grown-up listeners enjoyed the fairy-lore as much as the two tiny maids for whose original benefit it was intended.

"They all seem very happy together, Miss Mary, don't they?" I said, when the reading aloud of Mrs. Langley's letter was finished. "It reads like a story—doesn't it?"

The marriage was to take place in January, and I was to be promoted to the womanly glory of "long dresses" on the occasion: an idea that filled me with a new and overpowering dignity even in anticipation. It so chanced that I had not seen Mr. Girdstone since Eulalie's betrothal was a known fact until one day I met him in Bromley meadows. I thought his trowsers seemed to have shrunk away from his ankles more than ever, and assuredly his hat was more on the back of his head. But the kind old face was the same; the eyes guileless and tender as those of a child; the shrivelled hand as ready to close on mine and hold it fast and close.

Miss 'Dosia was, perhaps, more terrible in her winter than her summer gear; for a black beaver bonnet is a most forbidding kind of armour, and her fur tippet was of some uncomfortable kind of fur, that stood out on end in every direction, and could not be persuaded to lie down sleek and smooth. I used to think it must be the product of some peculiar kind of animal kept for her benefit alone; for I never saw any fur at all like it before, and I have never seen any of so rampant and unmanageable a nature since. Her dress was of what she called "a sensible walking length"—that is, it displayed her square ankles and large serviceable boots in all their native grace; indeed,

a general and prevailing idea of ankles was the impression always left upon the mind of the beholder after meeting this brother and sister in their out-door costume.

"Ah, Nell! Well, my dear, going to fetch butter and eggs, eh?" said the vicar, holding me by the hand and pointing to the basket on my arm. It was a way he had to make little feeble jokes when Miss Theodosia was in her grimmest moods; I think he did it in a sort of forlorn hope that the mind of the destined victim of these moods might be soothed and diverted thereby.

Then he began to fidget from one foot to the other, for a kind of rustling of his sister's rampant plumes told that she was in the throes of rising ideas, presently to find utterance.

"So your nose is put out of joint, Miss Nell?"

I stood silent, my eyes fixed with a kind of fascination upon her face, where something that was meant for a smile, but which was almost a sneer, played lamently.

The vicar's fidgeting seemed meanwhile ready to develop into a kind of Indian war-dance, in the which his umbrella should do duty as a tomahawk. "Tut! Nonsense! 'Nose out of joint;' no such thing!" he ejaculated, getting poppy-red.

"You mean, Miss Theodosia," said I, speaking very deliberately in my efforts after the dignity becoming in a Vansittart; "you mean that papa will not care about me any more now that he is going to marry Eulalie? Well, you are mistaken—quite mistaken; and you're thinking so just shows how very little you know of him, or of—any of us." I included Eulalie boldly in this "any of us," and Miss Theodosia for once in her life seemed thoroughly taken aback—as, indeed, people generally are when their hints and innuendos are clothed in plain words, and set before them in the light of day.

"We shall get our deaths of cold standing here with the wind cutting us in two," said the vicar eagerly, stamping his boots as if to restore the circulation in the feet they covered.

"Yes," I answered; "it is cold. Good-bye." And then, after touching the wooden joints of Miss Theodosia's fingers, and getting a warm grasp from her brother, I sped on my way, my head bent as though to stem the roughness of the keen east wind, but in reality to hide from any passer-by the angry tears that rose to my eyes and blurred my sight.

"So that is how people talk—that is

how people think of all these things!" I thought in bitter protest against those constructions that the world is pleased to put upon our actions for us, and against which it is so useless to rebel.

"They think I'm jealous, do they; they pity me because papa will not care for me any more—as if—as if"—I reiterated in my passionate resentment for the wrong done to me and to him—"anything or anybody in this world could make us love each other one bit less dearly than we do. Oh, it is shameful!"

Down dropped the hot tears. I was blind—deaf, too, surely, for I never heard the sound of footsteps behind me, and started so that I nearly let fall the basket which held some jelly for a sick child in the village, when someone spoke quite close to me:

"Nell! see, dear, you dropped your handkerchief."

It was the vicar, a little breathless with hurrying after me, and looking as if he were full of a kind of radiant sunshine of his own, so rejoiced was he in having outwitted his sister. I looked up at him with drowned eyes and trembling lips; and, as he stuffed the handkerchief into my hand, he whispered to me, forgetting the distance at which the grim figure in the fur-tippet stood waiting for him:

"Don't mind what she said, child; it's all stuff and nonsense, every bit of it. Dear, dear, don't cry; tut-tut! never cry about it."

"It's not true, Mr. Girdstone," I gasped out. "I hate anyone to say such things—to speak so of papa and me."

"No, no; it's not true, not a word of it," he whispered, with a stealthy backward glance; "don't you mind it—don't think about it, there's a dear child."

I felt so much for his distress for me that, meeting his kind eyes, I managed to call up a feeble sort of smile; at which he nodded till I thought his hat must come off its perilous resting-place upon the back of his head, and then trotted off to where, looking like a scarecrow set up to frighten birds from corn, stood Miss Theodosia, gaunt and grim.

"I wish I had told her that my dress for the wedding is to be made quite long. How vexed she'd have been! and she couldn't have done anything—not a thing—to shorten it one inch!" was my next not very amiable reflection.

Then I reached the village, and saw a little worn white face lifted from its pillow to smile at the pretty yellow jelly, that quivered on the willow-patterned plate I set it on.

"I have brought it with Miss Mary Sylvester's love," I said to the sick child's mother, proud and glad to see how she smiled at hearing the dear donor's name.

"She knows how to comfort a poor creature that's full of sorrow, does Miss Mary, God bless her gentle ways!" said the woman. "There is them as means well, I make no doubt, but as do harass a body dreadful with their pryin' ways."

"Ah," thought I to myself, "the scare-crow has been here, hurting other people as she has been hurting me."

As I went towards home again a sudden squall of wind and rain came on, driving in my face and wetting me through to the skin. I had no umbrella with me, as it chanced; but even if I had, it would have been but little use. The wind seemed to have gone wild, and was tearing like a mad thing at everything within its reach. Not only did it sway the poor trees earthwards, but gave them a wrench round when it got them down; and as to my hat, which came untied in the melee, I saw it disappear aloft, with its strings streaming out behind like the legs of a bird. It was rain that bit and stung that now beat upon my uncovered head; rain that drove straight along the ground; rain that made little pools in the pathway, and then churned them into miniature maelstroms. All this was unpleasant enough with three wide fields still to traverse, and my hat gone.

Suddenly a ponderous figure appeared looming in my pathway—a sort of stout mummy, swathed in curious garments. It was Sarah, the Summerfield cook, that cunning deviser of cakes and tarts, wrapped in a huge waterproof, head and all. In another moment I was as shapeless as herself, for she came well provided with wraps, and the two of us, holding on to each other, made the best way we could homewards. As we reached the little gate in the garden hedge, there was Miss Mary wildly gesticulating at the kitchen door, and I, breaking from cook, fled to that warm and welcome shelter.

Miss Mary blamed herself for letting me have my own way in the matter of carrying the jelly to the sick child. "It was against my better judgment," she said, making me drink a glass of steaming cowslip-wine and water.

I am afraid I rather enjoyed the whole thing: the fuss, and the cowslip-wine, and the general upset; as one is apt to enjoy such things when one is very young indeed, both in years and feeling.

But with the next morning came other and more grave reflections.

There was something odd the matter with my throat, and the stinging rain-drops seemed still making my eyes dim and heavy. As the day passed on these things grew worse instead of better, and a sharp pain now and again caught me as I drew my breath.

Old Doctor Glumford, our Bromley Esculapius, came to see me that night, and twice the day after; and that stabbing pain, instead of catching my breath now and then, was so constant that I dared not draw an honest breath at all, but tried to get along with short quick gasps.

What came after this is misty; but always through the haze of my troubled consciousness shone the loving anxious faces of Miss Mary and Miss Jane, while Miss Maria, keys and all, came at fitful intervals. Indeed, the basket that held them, taking hold of my mind as trifles are apt to do when the brain is unstrung and the body suffering, played no small part in my delirious fancies. I was sailing on a troubled sea in that frail vessel of straw; the keys got entangled about my feet; the water oozed in through the sides of my craft, and was cold—cold—cold—rising round me.

I strove madly to bale it out with my hands, but it slid through my fingers; and still, higher and higher, the straw boat filled.

Then all at once I found myself sitting up in my little white bed crying out for help, and someone—could it be papa?—caught me in his arms, held me close, and quieted my delirious fears.

"Am I very ill? Am I going to die and leave you?" I sobbed, clinging about his neck; and he, kissing me between the words, said: "No, my darling; God will spare you to me now, Nell."

After that night things grew clearer to me, and soon I found that Christmas had come quite near without my knowing.

"What about the wedding, and my beautiful long dress?" I said to papa one day when I was able to sit up and look through my window at a white world, snow-clad even to the tiniest twig upon the bare boughs of the hawthorn bushes.

"The wedding must wait till you are better, Nell," he said; and then he added: "Eulalie has been in dreadful trouble about you, dear; she has written nearly every day."

"Thank her for me," I said; and then I put my face up to his, and kissed him. "Give her that for me," I whispered shyly.

I did not like that idea of the wedding being put off.

I took Miss Mary into my confidence on the matter, and she, calling to mind that Eulalie had no home of her own, but was obliged to remain in a kind of false position at Mrs. Langley's until papa took her away, came round to my view of things, and between us we persuaded him to let things take their course. "I can wear the long dress another time," I said, smiling, when this was settled. Yet I only spoke thus lightly to hide from him the pain it was to have to give it all up. As to spending my Christmas at Summerfield, there was no hardship in that. The old place was like a cage from which five-and-twenty chattering magpies had flown, and its perfect quiet was very grateful to me in my weakness.

The wedding-day was the fifth day of the new year; and the world was still as white and glistening as if it were a huge wedding-cake.

"See," I said to Miss Mary, as the hour appointed for the marriage drew on, "the sun is shining his best for them, though he is only a winter sun. I shall shut my eyes and fancy I hear the bells of Hazledene; they sound so sweet, ringing out over the water, and the hills giving back an echo."

"You may shut your eyes and fancy what you like, if you drink this beef-tea that Sarah has just brought upstairs first of all," she said, smiling.

I think papa and Eulalie must have taken some of the sunshine with them on their wedding journey, for their letters seemed full of it; a fact that the spirit of mischief ever lurking in my heart caused me to animadvert upon with much effusion to Miss 'Dosia on the occasion of our first meeting after my illness. Then I added, looking innocently into the yawning cavern of the big beaver bonnet: "Don't I look as if I had been dreadfully spoilt while I have been ill, Miss Theodosia?"

"Has it been really only a cold, or were you fretting?" she answered spitefully.

But the buoyancy of convalescence was over me, and I resisted gallantly.

"Both," I said, laughing; "it was pleurisy, and I fretted myself the more because I was to have worn a dress with a real long train at the wedding, and couldn't, you see."

Spring came early that year, and how lovely looked my "Land of Beulah" as her sweet breath touched it! When you looked upwards through the trees, a rose-green mist told you of a million tiny buds swelling into life. In my wood the birds sang like mad; and

The green grass climbing through the brown, the sheen of a butter-cup here and there, and the priceless treasure of the first violet found nestling in one sheltered nook, told that the winter was past.

Time flew quickly by, and soon, or it seemed soon, the lilac-trees were weighed down with perfumed pyramids of bloom, the laburnum shook out its golden tresses to the wind, and the guelder-roses—nature's snow-balls—tempted little Amy's fingers to forbidden thefts.

So day followed day in that eternal procession that is so pitilessly changeless, no matter if it be joy or sorrow to which it drifts us on, and the last day before our Easter going-home-day came round.

Now Easter was to take me to Hazledene, and I was as ready to sing as the thrushes in the wood at the prospect of so much happiness:

Te souviens-tu, Marie,
De notre enfance aux champs——

But here I stopped short, for the old song did not adequately express my pleasures to come. It would be in the old home by the sea-shore—in the dear old home that faithful Roland guarded—that Eulalie and I should renew our dear companionship. My heart was as light as a feather; I even condescended to forget my budding "young-lady dignity," and played hare-and-hounds with the younger fry when all the packing was done.

I was merry all day, but at night the dream-child came to me—still clothed in rags that clung about its shrunken limbs; still weeping; still lifting its wee, white, weary face, streaming with tears, to mine.

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